



ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

January 1993

European North Sea District HIV/AIDS Task Force

The European North Sea District HIV/AIDS Task Force exists to educate and inform MCC's in that District about HIV/AIDS. The Task Force grew out of a concern that issues related to HIV/AIDS, particularly death, dying, and bereavement, were not always being adequately addressed in local churches. As a result, at the District Conference in Eastbourne, England, in 1990, Michael Moffatt held a workshop on death, HIV/AIDS, and bereavement. The discussion went on an hour longer than expected, and a Task Force was created out of the excitement generated by the workshop. Rev. Ian Westby, the District Fundraiser, staged a raffle for the Task Force, which raised 2,000 pounds, half of which went to the District, and half to the HIV/AIDS Task Force.

The Task Force met to plan their goals and structure, appointing two coordinators, Michael Moffatt and Bob Webb; a Secretary, Peter Geekie; a Treasurer, David Brownfield-Pope; a Women's Officer, Lynne Reay; and a Youth Officer, Antony Harrison. The group wrote a constitution to work within the parameters of the District Standard Operating Procedures and the Fellowship Bylaws. However, they carefully and rigidly maintain their autonomy. According to Moffatt, "This is to protect the group. We are able to be blunt in the information we give out, and we are able to administer our funds independently, although our books are open for anyone to see."

The group's first project was to produce an information packet. They collated all the informational and educational pamphlets from all over the United Kingdom, representing many perspectives, and included rubber gloves, condoms, KY jelly, and dental dams in each packet. These packets were made available free to all MCC's, but the Task Force told ALERT that the packets have actually been more in demand outside

the churches. This project cost a total of 260 pounds, with many leaflets and supplies being donated.

At the 1991 District Conference in Manchester, England, the Task Force set up a display on safer sex in the space used for worship. "We received a lot of back flack on this; but we deliberately didn't staff the display, and all the condoms, dental dams, and other supplies disappeared by the end of the conference."

The Task Force also produced a workshop on death which was "quite well-attended." The purpose of the workshop was to look squarely at the issues around death and funerals. The opportunity was offered to learn how to plan a funeral, something which had never been talked about before in local churches or at District Conference. "People kept trying to change the subject from death and grief to talking more about practical care of the sick," but members of the Task Force kept bring-

ing people back to the main agenda.

Also at the conference, Michael Moffatt preached at the Saturday evening service, admonishing pastors to start talking about death and other issues related to HIV/AIDS. A year later, at the Hamburg District Conference, people were still talking about Michael's sermon.

On April 11, 1992, the Task Force held an "Open Day" for the District to learn about liturgical resources related to HIV/AIDS. People from all over the District attended, including a participant from Denmark. People responded very positively to this day-long event, and as a follow-up, the Task Force is working on developing a packet on funeral liturgies.

Safer sex videos have been purchased by the Task Force, as well as videos on AIDS in Africa. These videos are made available to all churches in the District to facilitate their HIV/AIDS education efforts.

The Task Force also organized the closing worship service for the 1992 District Conference in Hamburg, Germany. In addition, the Task Force has taken responsibility for training Deacons in personal issues around HIV/AIDS, through the all-District Deacons' Training held in Brighton, England.

Through the Task Force, MCC has an influential presence on the prestigious London Ecumenical AIDS Forum, which is chaired by the Dean of Westminster Abbey. Michael Moffatt and Lynne Reay have been closely involved with this group since the organizing phase.

Lynne Reay sees her role as Women's Officer "to raise awareness of women's issues and specifically lesbian issues related to HIV/AIDS." Lynne reports that there has been a great deal of opposition to hearing about women's

(continued on page 2)



Peter Geekie and Michael Moffatt leading worship service at District Conference in Hamburg, Germany.

On The Front Line!

By An Anonymous UFMCC Pastor

Our Town wasn't a big city. We knew about AIDS and how it was affecting gay men in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and New York. We had heard other areas were experiencing this deadly disease. But for the most part it was striking metropolitan areas. No one in Our Town had been affected. It was 1985, and just a few people had been diagnosed in our entire state. We were certain the epidemic would bypass us!

When whispers began that "someone" may have AIDS, that "someone" lost his popularity. Anyone who suspected he may be ill kept the information to himself. Who would want to associate with a person with AIDS? Denial was the game we played, and most of us in the MCC I pastored in Our Town played along. If denial was rampant within the gay and lesbian community, politicians were using this opportunity to flex their homophobic muscle.

Then one day the telephone rang. A nurse at one of the local hospitals was on the line. She wondered if it were possible for me to come visit a young lesbian who was being treated for AIDS. With my mind in a whirl I headed for the

House of Mercy. A lesbian with AIDS? Women are not at risk; how could this have happened?

She was in isolation and the hospital required I don gown, mask and gloves. I felt awkward as I approached her bed. Her body barely rippled the sheet covering her. I fought tears as I noted prominent cheek bones and claw-like hands. Only her fire-filled eyes told me she was not a corpse. I introduced myself as the pastor of MCC, and a smile crossed her face. I took her hand in mine as she poured out her story.

As we prayed together, she promised she would keep in touch when she left the hospital. I told her I would be available any time she needed me. I wrote my home phone number on my business card and left it on the table.

I was shaken. What if others are infected and some of our church members develop AIDS? What if this disease has no boundaries and Our Town isn't exempt? I began to seek all the information I could find concerning HIV/AIDS. I needed to educate our people. Will they listen? Clearly, the answer was "No." Workshops were sparsely attended, and I couldn't seem to get folks interested in learning more. A few of our

members were aware of impending danger, but most of them thought I was making much ado about nothing.

One Sunday I noticed a visitor who seemed to be well-known by many of the men in our congregation. He was resoundingly welcomed and was introduced to me. His physique indicated he was no stranger to athletics. I learned he had participated in marathons, winning two years in a row. I was impressed!

During our prayer request time I was astounded when he stood and announced, voice quivering, that he had been "diagnosed." He said he believed he would conquer this disease and coveted our prayers. I could feel the tension in the room. This athlete has AIDS? And he's right here in our church. I was pleased to note our members did not turn away from him! I whispered a quick "thank you" and began my pastoral prayer.

Very soon, one by one, we began to receive the news that AIDS was, indeed, active in Our Town! Some men were coming home from distant cities; others who had never left the state became ill.

(continued on page 4)

European North Sea District (continued from page 1)

safer sex in MCC's in the United Kingdom. "We don't know if there are any women with HIV in our churches right now, but there will be," she asserts. Contradictory messages from the Terrence Higgins Trust (one of England's primary HIV/AIDS educational organizations) about the necessity of dental dams for lesbian sex, have contributed to this resistance. But Lynne proudly points out that the Samaritan sexuality course now includes information about lesbian safer sex and dental dams. Others on the Task Force report that Lynne is "beautifully brazen" in her lectures and demonstrations.

Antony Harrison, an 18-year-old Londoner, was appointed Youth Officer to relate to young people: to talk on their own level, and in their own language. The statistics among young gay men are frightening: HIV continues to spread rapidly in this population. Antony reports that there was no sex education in the schools he has attended. People in the District know the Task Force is committed to Youth Issues because of Antony's presence and visibility. There are a couple of people under 21 in the District who are known to be HIV-positive.

The Task Force is not totally focused on HIV/AIDS in the European North Sea District; one of their activities is to help TASO, an AIDS support organization in Africa. At the recent District Conference in Hamburg, the Task Force raised 430 pounds for TASO to help children in Africa who have been

orphaned by AIDS. One member of the Task Force says, "When AIDS gets a grip on Africa, it gets a grip on all of us. So we're looking after ourselves by looking at the effect AIDS in Africa will have on the global economy."

The European North Sea District HIV/AIDS Task Force has a striking sense of urgency to their task. With five of the eight members interviewed having HIV themselves, Michael Moffatt says, "We literally don't have the time to wait for more pastors and churches to wake up to our issues. Metropolitan Community Churches are the best-placed churches in Christendom to deal with HIV issues. People in MCC have got to get real. You're born, you die. You have to face the facts." With Michael stepping down to pursue a Masters in Theology degree, the Task Force is looking for new blood. "We've asked each church to nominate a representative to our Task Force, but so far only two churches have. We need more response from outside the group; we need new blood."

Preben Sloth, a member of Markens Liljer MCC in Copenhagen, Denmark, is working to start a closed support network for people with HIV in the District, because no one understands what it's like to live with HIV like other people with HIV. "Particularly in some of our smaller churches, we can't get that kind of support." The Task Force's primary focus will continue to be education and prevention. As Michael states, "Sometimes we've felt like a little voice in the wilderness." But with voices like Michael Moffatt, Lynne Reay, and Preben Sloth, that little voice will be heard throughout the European North Sea District! ▼

Field Director of AIDS Ministry Tours European North Sea District

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters, Field Director of UFMCC AIDS Ministry, toured the European North Sea District during the month of November, 1992. Visiting MCC's in Southampton, Bournemouth, Bath, Paris, Hamburg, Copenhagen, London, and Brighton, Pieters also spoke to non-MCC audiences in southern England and Denmark.

Pieters told ALERT, "The purpose of my trip was to facilitate and encourage HIV/AIDS ministry, to share my story and my sense of hope and faith in living with HIV/AIDS for over 10 years now, and to gather material for ALERT. I found myself also doing a lot of counseling with people living with HIV, as well as their caregivers, pastors, and loved ones."

In addition to preaching at local MCC's, Pieters was one of the keynote speakers at an all-day HIV conference sponsored by the Portsmouth Health Authority for over 400 health care workers; an AIDS Ministry Conference sponsored by Pax Christi MCC and St. Denys' Church of England in Southampton; and for a group of social service workers in Southampton who were focusing on issues of sexuality.

In Paris, Pieters was the first American visitor, and first representative of the UFMCC headquarters staff to visit the new MCC Paris. He stayed with the Pastor, Caroline Blanco, and her partner, Catherine, who gave him a splendid tour of Paris by night, ending at Montmartre, on the steps of Sacre Coeur, "with all Paris at our feet!" Pieters met with members of the Paris MCC, where he did his presentation in French. "I went to school in France when I was 14, but twenty-odd years later, while I understood much of what was being said to me, when it came to speaking French, it was the shortest speech I've ever given!" The HIV/AIDS situation in France is extremely grave, for a variety of reasons, and MCC Paris has an incredible challenge before it in doing HIV/AIDS Ministry. An article detailing the circumstances will appear in a future issue of ALERT.

Rev. Pieters was a guest of the District at the District Conference in Hamburg, Germany. In addition to being the luncheon speaker on Saturday and preaching at MCC Hamburg Sunday evening, Pieters held a "Focus Group" at the Conference to solicit feedback from Europeans on the goals and objectives of UFMCC AIDS Ministry. "The focus group went extremely well once people began to open up," Pieters relates. "I received lots of valuable information and advice which I will bring back to the UFMCC AIDS Ministry Long-



Rev. Steve Pieters and Caroline Blanco, pastor of MCC Paris.

Range Planning Task Force."

In Denmark, Pieters addressed the "HIV in the Church" organization, an ecumenical AIDS Ministry group. Rev. Mia Andersen, pastor of Markens Liljer MCC in Copenhagen, reports, "Rev. Pieters' visit increased the credibility of MCC in Denmark." In Danish, "HIV" also means "to give a kick in the pants to," which the group feels is particularly appropriate for their name.

The last weekend Pieters was in the District, he conducted a workshop at MCC London on how to do a "Spiritual Strength for Survival Support Group." The workshop was well-attended by representatives from 10 churches. Several said, "This will be the first opportunity we've had to get real spiritual support in a group, for our lives with HIV."

In future issues of ALERT, look for more reports on what is happening around HIV/AIDS in the European North Sea District. "I learned far more than I taught," Pieters states. "I look forward to sharing what I learned with the Fellowship through ALERT." ▼

CDC NAC Online

CDC NAC ONLINE, a computerized information network for the U.S., offers organizations a direct link to the Clearinghouse's comprehensive information collection as well as to others working in HIV/AIDS. Using a personal computer and modem, professionals can keep up to date with HIV-related news through the *AIDS Daily Summary*; participate in interactive forums; communicate through electronic mail; access CDC's AIDS-related MMWR articles; and search the CDC Clearinghouse databases. Call the CDC Clearinghouse (see related story on page 4) to learn how to gain access to CDC NAC ONLINE. ▼

ALERT

ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is Rev. Dr. A. Stephen Pieters. For more information, or to send a donation, please write or call: ALERT, c/o UFMCC, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90029; (213) 464-5100.

CDC US National AIDS Clearinghouse

An Important Resource for Religious and Faith Communities in the U.S.

The CDC National AIDS Clearinghouse is a comprehensive HIV/AIDS information service for those who minister with religious and faith communities.

A service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Clearinghouse collects, classifies, and distributes up-to-date information and provides expert assistance to HIV- and AIDS-prevention professionals.

The CDC Clearinghouse serves clergy, public health personnel, educators, and social service workers. These professionals work in a variety of settings such as churches and religious schools, seminaries, hospitals, community organizations, clinics, and AIDS-service organizations.

Information Services:

An experienced team of reference specialists with a broad knowledge of AIDS organizations and materials can access a wealth of information about HIV and AIDS.

Call the CDC Clearinghouse toll free at:

1-800-458-5231 (voice)
or 1-800-243-7012 (deaf access/TDD)

and these specialists will answer inquiries, make referrals, and help locate publications pertaining to HIV infection and AIDS. Spanish and French speaking specialists, also available. ▼

On The Front Line!

(continued from page 2)

Our athlete's health was rapidly deteriorating. He decided to move to his home town where his mother and brother resided. It was a hundred miles away and I tried to visit him at least once a week.

It was becoming more and more difficult to finish my paper work during daytime hours, and I often found myself in the church office at midnight, answering mail, planning the worship, and studying for Sunday's sermon. I knew I wasn't getting enough rest, yet I couldn't seem to find a way to solve that problem. I was visiting persons with AIDS on a daily basis. I often cried between visits, but presented a smiling face when I arrived.

The angel of death seemed to be suspended over us! As I stood in the pulpit and looked at the dear faces in the pews, I couldn't help wondering who would be next. It had been more than a year since I had been called to visit the lesbian who was my first person with AIDS. Our athlete died; after I did the funeral in his hometown, where I had to deny his very being, we had a memorial service at MCC. We celebrated his life and acknowledged the cause of death. Another member had moved away to be near his parents, so I was weekly making another two hundred mile round trip to spend a few hours with him. One member lost both parents in a three-week period, and a deacon lost his mother. Many of our friends were dying. I spent countless hours each week helping people to grieve. I had no time for my own grief. I had become too numb to cry.

Rumblings were beginning among some of the church members. They felt their pastor spent too much time on AIDS ministry! Some claimed they could not get an appointment because I was not available to anyone except persons with AIDS. The board of directors encouraged me to ignore the grumbling. Most of them were visiting patients almost as often as I and were fully supportive. Together we prayed for the strength and wisdom in a crisis situation.

As the time for General Conference in Miami approached, I was reluctant to go. I was reminded that all things work together for those who love God. I did another memorial service on Saturday night, and flew to Miami the following morning, and I was feeling quite numb.

The Rev. Elder Don Eastman asked me to do the pastoral

prayer at the Memorial Worship Service. As I faced that huge crowd, I joyfully observed the Rev. Steve Pieters' apparent good health, and sorrowed that the Rev.'s Emmett Watkins and Ron Russell-Coons seemed quite ill. It became more obvious that many clergy and lay persons in our denomination had AIDS.

The announcement came for all who had lost someone to AIDS to place their names upon the styrofoam sculpture at the front of the auditorium. As I sat on the stage, I watched them come. Many had pages of names, others had one. They were streaming forward in a seemingly endless line. The sculpture assumed a new shape as more panels were added. Suddenly I began to weep as the vast number of our losses became apparent.

Upon returning home I began to realize I couldn't seem to stop crying! A group of my friends recognized I needed help. They financed a weekend retreat for me at Kirkridge in Pennsylvania. The focus was to help those who had lost loved ones to AIDS and were dealing with unresolved grief. Father John McNeill guided us from denial to acceptance of the things we had no power to change. Although I felt better, I was still depressed. Another friend financed therapy sessions, and I began to recover.

I soon learned, however, that our church was still angry. We called many special board meetings to try to analyze the strange dynamics. We called a congregational meeting for the specific purpose of discussing the issues of concern. It was apparent to the board and to me there was an effort being made by a small number of members to replace me as pastor. I believed I had found the answer in David Augsburger's *Anger and Assertiveness in Pastoral Care*. One chapter dealt with anger caused by an inordinate number of severe illnesses and/or deaths within the body. And according to Augsburger, that anger centers upon the pastor. We felt that we were battling a phantom and didn't know the solution. All of us on the board were feeling abused. When my contract was not extended at the next congregational meeting, I resigned. So did all members of the board of directors.

While we have learned much during the past five years, many of our clergy and laity still feel marooned on an island of misunderstanding with little support. Denial continues to flourish among us! Why, I wonder, is it so difficult to believe, as the late Rev. Ron Russell-Coons so appropriately declared, "We are the church with AIDS!"? ▼